Conclusion: Lessons for leadership from unusual contexts

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Abstract

In this final chapter, we summarize the core challenges to leadership in complex organizational systems as well as the lessons that we believe leaders can learn from the contributions presented in this book. Building on Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), we argue that high levels of complexity characterize the contexts described, and that they are unusual because they deviate from the setting of standard business organizations. Since these contexts are not often discussed in the general leadership literature, there seems to be a largely unused potential in terms of leadership learning. Specifically, in order to better contextualize leadership, scholars and practitioners need to take organizational complexity into account. With reference to the underlying structure of the book, core challenges to leadership in complexity are proposed, clustering around four main foci: *competition, high risk, creativity and innovation, care and community*. Subsequently, we derive six lessons for leadership: *adaptability*, *perseverance*, *handling paradox*, *leading with values*, *inventing the future*, and *sharing responsibility*. We thereby hope to stimulate fruitful discussions that put leadership into context and capitalize on complexity theory as an innovative approach to leadership research and practice.

Keywords: challenges, context, complexity, leadership, unusual

Conclusion: Lessons for leadership from unusual contexts

This book presents a collection of fifteen chapters on leadership from different contexts. The contexts are unusual in that they deviate from the setting of standard business organizations, and characterized by high levels of complexity. We set out to learn from these contexts that are not often discussed in the general leadership literature. Leadership theory and research appears to be limited by the unused potential of studying leadership in these contexts. Our approach is to suggest that rather than generalizing from leadership in standard business organizations to other, non-standard contexts, lessons can be drawn from such unusual, high-complexity contexts. This includes lessons relevant for more common contexts (i.e., business organizations) as well as learning about the idiosyncrasies that unusual contexts require.

Leadership is characterized by core challenges. While these challenges apply to all contexts, they do so to different extents. We argue that leadership challenges are particularly prominent in the contexts presented, and thus the contributions in this book are well-suited for leadership scholars and practitioners to recognize the impact of these challenges – and to understand how they may be addressed successfully in the future.

Leadership in complexity

The underlying assumption of this book is that nowadays, leaders are challenged by the complexity of organizational systems. It is "the unpredictable, the surprising, and the unexpected" that more often than not shape actions of individuals in organizations (Sargut & McGrath, 2011, p. 70). Given this complexity, leaders are expected to be the enablers of organizational effectiveness. Yet, they are no longer able to determine or even control organizational effectiveness in linear, mechanistic ways (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). In our view, contextualizing leadership essentially means taking organizational complexity into account.

Thus, we embed the idea of contextualizing leadership into complexity theory, and Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), in particular. New communication and information technologies have been advancing at high pace throughout the twenty-first century, influencing the ways in which organizations function. These developments create a need for organizations to "respond, adapt, and anticipate" (Regine & Lewin, 2000, p. 5). Notably, the resulting complexity in organizations is not the same as being *complicated*. Complicated systems contain many interconnected parts, but still follow predictable patterns (e.g., the functioning of an aircraft). Complexity instead describes the dynamic internal structure of a system that changes constantly to adapt to new demands. Thereby, outcomes remain unpredictable, they are "productive, but largely unspecified, future states" (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, p. 391).

Complexity Leadership Theory is concerned with "leadership *in* and *of* complex adaptive systems" (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009, p. 631). Leadership of organizations deals with macro-level leadership, while leadership in organizations evolves at micro-levels. Derived from general complexity theory, Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) set forth three main propositions for leadership: First, effective leadership cultivates largely undirected, global *interaction* among different units in the system (e.g., individuals, work groups, departments). Second, a degree of dynamic stability is reached through the emergence of shared understanding within the system, that is, *correlation*. Effective leadership fosters correlation by enabling interaction. Third, since the futures of complex systems are ultimately *unpredictable*, effective leadership embraces and enables productive surprises. In essence, leadership in and of complex systems no longer controls the future. It merely enables it.

Leadership in context

Previous literature has stressed the need to investigate organizational behavior in context (Fairhurst, 2009; Liden & Antonakis, 2009; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Contexts represent idiosyncratic opportunities and constraints that shape how people in organizations create shared understandings and how they feel, think, and act (Johns, 2006). Despite the concerns that have been voiced to take context into account, scholars posit that "its influence is often unrecognized or underappreciated" (Johns, 2006, p. 389). Nevertheless, we acknowledge that significant attempts have been made to contextualize leadership (e.g., Endrissat & von Arx, 2013; Fairhurst, 2009; Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009; Liden & Antonakis, 2009; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir & Howell, 1999).

Scholars agree that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), and that organizational members act to co-create leadership (e.g., Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Moreover, a generally accepted view is that effective leadership depends on contextual factors rather than being universal (e.g., Osborn et al., 2002). Further underlining the importance of contextual factors, we know that organizational culture (e.g., innovation, competitiveness, supportiveness) as part of the context influences whether individuals are attracted to an organization (e.g., person-organization fit; O'Reilly III, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), what types of leadership emerge in the organization, and the extent to which different types of leadership are effective (e.g., charismatic leadership; Shamir & Howell, 1999). Still, a micro view of leadership (e.g., styles, behaviors) seems to persist, and an overarching framework of contextual variables and their influence on organizations is missing (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). On the one hand, contextualizing leadership in modern organizations, which are complex systems, is more than traditional approaches can capture. On the other hand, leadership theory and research in non-standard contexts are too unclear about their contributions to the general field of leadership. As DiRenzo, Weingarden, and Resick (this volume) ask, is research of leadership in sports, for

instance, meant to answer questions about leadership in this specific context – or might it be designed to understand core challenges and draw lessons for organizational leadership in general? We concur with the latter view, and thus rely on the contributions in this book with the aim of fostering a contextualized understanding of leadership in organizations.

Core challenges and lessons

As described above, leadership is a dynamic, contextual phenomenon that occurs in a multitude of different organizations or systems (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Innovation, learning, and adaptability are critical outcomes of leadership. In order to achieve these outcomes, leadership scholars and practitioners need to take the most pressing challenges to leadership into account. One way of addressing these core challenges is to learn from unusual contexts. Generally, we can learn from them that leadership is more complex than standard business contexts suggest, and that valuable lessons can be derived from the idiosyncrasies of leadership in such contexts. More specifically, we collected chapters on contexts clustering around four main foci: *competition, high risk, creativity and innovation, care and community*. For each of the chapters presented within these clusters, we observed that they represent contexts that are unusual (i.e., deviate from the setting of standard business contexts to certain extents) and characterized by high levels of complexity. However, the reasons *why* they are complex differ between contexts. In the following, we focus on these four areas to describe core challenges to leadership in complex organizational systems. We illustrate the areas briefly with examples from the respective chapters. Table 1 provides a summary of the challenges.

Competition. Leaders are under high, personalized pressure to be successful, while they can only create enabling conditions for organizational effectiveness.
High risk. Navigating the extremes of 'life or death' contexts, leaders' actions have potentially devastating consequences for themselves and others.
Creativity and innovation. Leaders are confronted with the paradox between essentially striving for creativity and innovation, while ultimately having to meet specified targets.
Care and community. Contextual conditions impede leaders' attempts and responsibilities to take care of others' wellbeing.

Table 1. Summary of core challenges to leadership

First, extreme levels of *competition* contribute to complexity in some organizations. For example, managers of football clubs create enabling conditions for performance, while the ultimate success (i.e., scoring a goal) can be characterized as a rare event and underlies a high impact of chance. Yet, if teams perform badly, managers are likely to be sacked (Schyns, Gilmore, & Dietz, this volume). Second, the complexity of *high-risk* contexts such as the military or aviation arises from the extremes of 'life or death', namely, the devastating consequences that individuals' and teams' actions may have. Since the core purpose of military interventions is maintaining security, organizational members are "granted legitimacy to use force whenever necessary" (Kark, Karazi-Presler, & Tubi, this volume, p. xx). The use of force, in turn, holds potentially devastating consequences for the physical and psychological wellbeing of military personnel and civilians. Third, complexity also arises in organizations that essentially strive for *creativity and innovation*, while ultimately having to meet specified targets in their respective fields. For example, in academia constant tensions between creativity and innovation on the one hand, and structures, procedures, and in part antiquated (legal) rules on the other hand persist (Peus et al., this volume). In Hollywood, instead, a paradox resides between creating innovative movies and box-office success (Murphy, this volume). Several major studios compete with each other (e.g., SONY, Warner

Brothers, Universal, Pixar, Disney) as well as with providers of new services (e.g., streaming, video games). The quest for creativity and innovation becomes even more complex when teams and their members are geographically distributed, as the example of dispersed new product development teams shows (Muethel & Hoegl, this volume). Finally, concerns for *care and community* create complexity in other organizations. While care has become a critical value in many modern organizations (Peus, 2011; van Dierendonck, 2011), some contexts impede leaders' valid attempts of caring for their followers. For example, in fast changing environments such as mergers and acquisitions (van Dierendonck & Sousa, this volume), leaders are challenged to create meaning for their followers. Care in these contexts requires that leaders convey a larger picture that even goes beyond the organization itself. Moreover, leaders are likely to struggle with the question of *how* to best take care of followers and other stakeholders, when these individuals and groups may have quite diverging interests. For example, volunteer multistakeholder groups create challenges in this regard (Hilton & Wageman, this volume). Complex societal problems (e.g., general access to low-cost, high-quality healthcare) require the involvement of multiple stakeholders across groups or organizations. Yet, most of the prominent approaches that dominate the leadership literature to date are likely to fall short of enabling success in such contexts. We therefore turn to the lessons that researchers and practitioners can learn from the contexts presented in this book. Table 2 provides a summary of the lessons.

Adaptability. Leaders who navigate their ways through complex contexts need to be flexible in their approach to leadership, tailoring it to the idiosyncrasies of each context.
Perseverance. Leaders need persistence to overcome drawbacks and failure in order to ultimately grow and succeed. Organizations foster this process by providing leaders with a supportive environment, while leaving room for personal growth.
Handling paradox. In complex contexts, paradox may arise in many different forms. Leaders can handle it, for example, by using formal and informal structures, and managing internal processes and external views of an organization simultaneously.
Leading with values. For the sake of their own and others' wellbeing as well as sustained organizational success, leaders need to reflect and act based on their fundamental beliefs and moral values.
Inventing the future. Leaders foster creativity through socially determined processes. New approaches such as play enable leaders to envision potentialities of the future.
Sharing responsibility. The complexities of modern organizations require leadership in the collective, for example, in the form of shared values-based leadership in communities.

Table 2. Summary of lessons for leadership

Adaptability

Across all contexts and chapters, probably the first and foremost lesson out of this book is that leaders who navigate their ways through complex contexts need to be flexible in their approach to leadership. While we acknowledge the validity of established approaches to effective leadership in general (e.g., consideration and initiating structure; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004), we also advocate for an understanding that what works in one context might or might not work in other contexts. Above and beyond of what we know about effective leadership in general, leaders are required to adapt to the context, their followers, and other stakeholders within and outside of the organization. This does not only refer to general principles, such as the necessity for emotional labor (Davis McCauley & Gardner; Floyd, Hoogland, & Smith, both this volume) or for being ethical (al Raffie & Huehn, this volume),

but also to the very specific expression of those emotions and ethical principles. For leadership development, this means that in training leaders the very specific aspects of the context they operate in have to be taken into account. The need for leader adaptability also translates into specific, particularly fast-changing contexts. Grote (this volume) describes for high-risk teams in aviation how building teams 'on the fly' challenges modern organizations and their leadership. Teams used to be bounded and relatively static groups of individuals interacting and engaging in common tasks over a given period of time (e.g., project management teams, top management teams, sports teams, military units). 'Teaming' is an activity that creates coordination and collaboration in groups almost instantaneously (Edmondson, 2012). While building teams 'on the fly' was once limited to teams in specific contexts (e.g., healthcare, aviation), we learned from the chapters that nowadays the majority of leaders and their teams need to adapt to ever-changing conditions.

Perseverance

We learned that leadership is a difficult job. This is an overarching lesson drawn from many contributions, especially those that deal with competitive contexts such as sports. Leaders are responsible to and under scrutiny of a range of different stakeholder groups (e.g., fans, Lord, Hendler Devlin, Oeth Caldwell, & Kass; but also religious audiences, Davis McCauley & Gardner; movie goers, Epitropaki & Mainemelis; Murphy; all this volume), some of which they have very limited interaction with. Leaders are now more exposed to public scrutiny (e.g., via social media) than ever before and that changes with whom and in what way leaders communicate and interact in order to make leadership 'work'. Another example of perseverance is the case study of Kathryn Bigelow, the only woman film director who has ever won an Academy Award for Best Director (Epitropaki & Mainemelis, this volume). Confronted with several box-office flops, Bigelow persevered and continued to pursue her own artistic vision. In the end, it was the authenticity of her films that ensured major

successes. This case highlights the persistence that leaders need in order to become (or stay) successful. Only leaders who overcome drawbacks and failure will ultimately grow and succeed. Herein lies another lesson for development in organizations: providing leaders with a supportive environment, while leaving them room for personal growth.

Handling paradox

We encountered the experience of paradox implicitly or explicitly in many chapters throughout the book (Bligh; Epitropaki & Mainemelis; Kark et al., all this volume). One lesson to draw from the authors' depictions is that, when leaders are challenged to handle paradox, organizations need to be well-equipped to support them through formal and informal structures. As Grote (this volume) describes for high-risk teams in aviation, one possible solution is the interplay of standardization and leadership. Pilots are a highly selected group of leaders who work with the newest, almost autonomous technologies. Crews are specially trained individuals as part of ad hoc teams, who rely on each other's knowledge and experience. To handle the paradox between automation and responsible action, in this context, tight formal regulations are in place. They create shared mental models of the tasks at hand, and the norms of how to handle them. Indeed leaders can actively create such shared mental models, whether through standardization or interaction with their teams (Dionne, Sayama, Hao, & Bush, 2010). Another example of how leaders can handle paradox is provided by Murphy (this volume), who describes how Walt Disney created animation as the "creative heart and soul of the organization", while keeping costs to a minimum. From this context we learned that leadership requires the ability to simultaneously, and sometimes independently, manage internal processes and external views of an organization. Finally, victimization of high achievers is one paradox that leaders in organizations need to handle as we learned from Floyd et al. (this volume). Envy, an emotion that in the past has been predominantly described as negative (e.g., Kim & Smith, 2007), may take negative

(malicious envy) as well as positive forms (benign envy). In order to promote benign invidious responses to high achieving individuals, the authors derive recommendations for leaders: increasing perceptions of fairness and followers' feelings of control over the situation, as well as an ethical organizational culture. We suppose that leaders who act based on their fundamental beliefs and moral values will be able to create this type of culture.

Leading with values

Leaders can be torn between their personal feelings, attitudes, and concerns, and the constraints that the quest for organizational effectiveness poses on them (e.g., limited resources, financial growth, multiple interests, risks). Research from the context of religious organizations, specifically in the West Texas Baptist church (Davis McCauley & Gardner, this volume), teaches us that leaders can modify their emotional expressions to meet momentary expectations. However, they do so at the expense of their authenticity. Pastors who engaged in surface acting rather than expressing genuine emotions feel less authentic, and may be at risk to develop burnout and emotional exhaustion. Thus, acting in line with their fundamental values and beliefs may be one way for leaders to maintain their personal sincerity and health. For the extreme case of terrorist leaders, al Raffie and Huehn (this volume) advocate to consider ethics in a normative sense rather than from a moral-relativist standpoint. Not only that, but *which* values shape leadership is critical for organizations and the society surrounding them.

Inventing the future

Film and television industries are prime examples of organizations in which innovation is the key to success. Murphy (this volume) illuminates leadership in Hollywood. In this context, where individuals' creativity is presupposed, exceptional results are likely to stem from creativity through socially determined processes. Namely, leaders and followers jointly create

a social context in which many different creative ability levels can flourish. Film directors take over a particularly prominent leadership role in this context. The case study of film director Kathryn Bigelow by Epitropaki and Mainemelis (this volume) illustrates their impact as artists and leaders. We learned from these two chapters that the process of generating innovation through creativity is a social one. Innovation necessitates a culture of creativity that penetrates all organizational units (Murphy, this volume). Yet, how can organizations train leaders to create such a culture? One answer to this question is: play. Harms and Spain (this volume) illustrate the positive effects of play and role-playing for leadership development in children and adults. Based on characters from the popular children's television show *The Transformers* the authors highlight the power of storytelling as a tool for leadership development. Since children of yesterday are leaders of today, this particular story is likely to resonate with them later in life and to shape their understanding of how organizations work. Furthermore, one way of eliciting imaginative potential in leaders might be to use this story in leader development. The chapter suggests that organizations need to broaden the scope of activities for leadership development. For example, Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, and Kerschreiter (2012) proposed drawing exercises as learning tools. These exercises provide leaders and followers with means of expressing their implicit leadership theories. Thereby, also contextual differences of such implicitly held beliefs about leadership become explicit and can be reflected. We learned that flexible and adaptive forms of leadership require creative, future oriented forms of leadership development.

Sharing responsibility

While the hitherto proposed lessons were primarily concerned with the responsibilities of individuals, in this final lesson we seek to highlight the role of the collective. Since individual leaders in complex contexts, such as geographically dispersed teams (Muethel & Hoegl, this volume), will be unlikely to successfully handle complexity on their own, enabling conditions

for collective enactment of leadership are required (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012). Sharing values-based leadership in a collective is one approach to be learned from volunteer multistakeholder groups (Hilton & Wageman, this volume). Leaders in the groups that Hilton and Wageman described created a community around values supporting sustained transformation of health and healthcare. And even in the extreme case of leadership in terrorist organizations, responsibilities are distributed among multiple stakeholders (al Raffie & Huehn, this volume).

Conclusion

Drawing from the multitude of unusual contexts presented here, we encourage leaders and other practitioners in organizations to take the above stated lessons into account. Furthermore, as this book indicates, leadership researchers who work on projects devoted to non-standard contexts need to reflect their role in building advanced theory and good practice. Models of leadership should take organizational complexity into account in order to contextualize leadership. In doing so, scholars in the field will derive more meaningful and specific models as well as lessons for leaders and their development in organizations.

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